The Dramatic Journey of Multicultural Theatre in Turkey

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ABSTRACT:*Among the instruments that reflects cultural integrity and originality the art of theatre holds an important place in a community's value system. Turkish theatre is rich in terms of authentic samples exhibiting the multicultural structure in the early Imperial and early Republican periods.In the scientific and cultural institutionsthat gain an identitywith the new Republic, there has been enormous progress for the creation of an original theatre tradition.However, with late Imperial and late Republican periods the changing social dynamics through external influences gradually remove culture and theatre from local and traditional. The recent domination of globalization has produced more concrete contradictions; theatre, in practice, has turned towards the samples that demonstrate its disengagement from the common symbolic space of multicultural structure.This article aims to examine the cultural decomposition andpopularization which cause a contradictory situation in the historical process and toraise awareness about returning to the common symbolic space.*

Keywords:Multiculturalism, globalization, Turkish theatre, decomposition, popularization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural roots of Turkish theatre dates back to the oldest civilizations settled in Anatolia having a very rich symbolic repertoire which forms cultural space of different communities that lives in this geography. In the Ottoman Empire period this rich source that involves all cultures had impacts on daily life of the people, practices of traditional folk theatre (Karagöz, Ortaoyunu, Meddah) troupes and on the countryside theatrical plays, total theatre structure of Ottoman festivals/carnivals, on rituals, myths, epics, folktales and ceremonies. In Ottoman Tanzimat period (reform era) the cultural confusion created by modernization movements in all spheres of life (1839) begin with European influence, resulted in withdrawal of traditional theatre and performance formsfrom the symbolic space. With transition from Ottoman Empire to Republican era (1923) the founding philosophy of new nation state attached importance to the existence of a symbolic repertoire in the field of art and specifically in theatre which reflects the common life of its people in areas of culture and art, and within this context adopted an indigenization. In this period universities and academies were established to enable the institutionalization of cultural and theatrical researches and practices. Despite all these efforts, after 1950's the disengagement of university studies and theatre practices resulted in Western modern theatre forms to come to the forefront. As for the globalization process (1980) in accordance with the economy politics implemented, the field of theatre took its share from the homogeneous cultural siege that carried out by the instruments of neo-capitalism. On the other hand, with new markets and consumerism policies, the meaning of multiculturalism has changed which exists in theatre practices and tradition of living. The detaching of cultures from others, the efforts to emphasize their differences to make them visible, the necessities of producing ethnic and ideological arguments begins to decompose common symbolic repertoire. At this point, the aim of this paper is to make a rewarding projection in the context of globalization's possible cultural resultsby showingthe phases of multicultural journey of Turkish theatre which gets further away from its traditional sources and its common symbolic field/area in terms of practice.

Culture and Symbolic Space

Etymologically "culture" derives from Latin word "cultura" points out an agricultural action meaning "cultivation" through education. Another meaning is the equivalent of the word "civilization" (Online Etymology Dictionary:80). With this context,it expresses the material and spiritual value system and itstoolsthat humanity has brought to history.

A community's "culture" reflects its symbolic space. The symbolic space is a set of abstraction of people's common lives who have acommon life experience and a common conscious. According to Strauss, abstractions in the symbolic space are "the systems that imply the basic and unchanged structure of human comprehension" (Strauss, 1986:8). The instruments composed community's symbolic space such asmyths, religious and non-religious rituals, morals, legislation, manners and customs, crafts and works of art etc. reflect that community's characteristics. In other words, this cultural tools establishing symbolic space are all of the presuppositions of traditional-feudal society's collective sub-conscious. On the other hand, in modern times and today the common functional tools of living together determines the culture system according to historical

conditions. Then, it can be said that with modernity culture evolves from a traditional rural nature to an urban-oriented system. Cohen explains urban culture as "the conciliation of the multiple roles of urban people"(Cohen, 1999:30).

Modernity, Culture and Theatre

In 19th century the institutionalized capitalism in Europe, developments in science and industrial revolution correspond to disintegration process of feudalism. The historical process brought the institutionalization of modern nation-states. As known, in nation-states traditional-symbolic repertories which are peculiar to communities continue their existence in themselves. Nation-states in a specific geography and under a supra-identity adopt the commonality oflanguage, history, culture and values as the founding principles in a homogenous structure. In a sense this means the commonality of symbolic space. Within this context, the art of theatre being a cultural value has a two-sided identity in nation-state system: institutionalized national theatre which takes reference from supra-identity and forms an arts policy in this direction and traditional theatres which reflects every aspect of community's culture, namely the sub-identity. For example, ComedieFrançaise founded in France in 1680 and Turkish State Theaters founded in Turkey in 1940 are national theaters with their structures and arts policies.

Reflection of Cultures inthe Theater of Republican and Imperial Period in Turkey

According to Turkish Theatre Researcher MetinAnd, the naming of "Turkish Theatre" as it is generally and widely used in Turkey carriesone meaning. Culturally it takes as reference the theatre of a nation-state namely Republic of Turkey's common-general symbolic repertoire. Although the word "Turkish" hereseems to mean ethnicity, it represents a supra-identity and not refers to an ethnic identity. Whereas today in our country there are theatres of traditional folk communities within the nation state that rely on specific ethnicities and cultures having an authentic symbolic space such as "Laz Theatre", "Circassian Theatre" or "Kurdish Theatre". Indeed, if resources relevant to "Traditional Turkish Theatre" are studied, we see that theatre ofall communities living inthe Ottoman Empire and modern Republic is visible and interactions in this field reflected without any discrimination. In this regard, it can be said that till Ottoman period Turkish Theatre has reflected multicultural nature of Turkey. The best examples can be seen at the symbolism of ethnic identities in "Ortaoyunu" and "Karagöz" which are the origin types of traditional Turkish Theatre. Moreover, in 1868 Armenian origin actor GüllüAgopand his performers who were given the operating rights of "Palace Theatre"and independently operating Armenian community theatres in large cities such as Istanbul and Izmir can be the other examples.In Tanzimat period (The Ottoman Reform) with the influence of Western theatre, traditional types slowly withdrew from the field and representation of people within the symbolic area decreasedgradually. Therefore, after the proclamation of the Republic the Western theatre further enhanced its effect on Turkish theatre despite of the warnings and calls forturning back to tradition. This situation caused a theatre nourished by Western custom instead of a national theatre nourished by tradition.

If we look subject from the representation ofdifferent languages in the theatre, the reason for using standard Turkish on the stage instead of using different languages in the Republican period was the common language argument of nation-state as previously mentioned. Apart from this, Turkish plays written by playwrightsfrom different ethnic backgrounds, with different cultural affiliations performed inthe state subsidized theaters and in other private theaters. The different cultures and identities in the staged plays are represented in the subjects and character designs. Besides Turkish, ethnic language features are presented through use of dialects.

Multicultural Theatre in Turkey in Globalization Process

In 1970's Western neo-capitalist practices spread all around the worldtargeted the areas of ethnic-traditional sub-culture in the nation-states other than the First World Countries. This post-colonialist period, as pointed out by many researchers, Edward Said being in the first place, focused on identity politics. It detached the sub-identities which were combined in nation-states by the identity of being a "citizen"; made visible the ethnic and religious identities' problems and their expectations. Literally this was a sociological and cultural transformation from modernism's "individual" design to postmodernism's "community-commune" design. Terry Eagleton links this transformation resulted in political consequences in modern nation-states to capitalism's "relentless instrumental logic" and its condition of "being attached to the hybrid and pluralistic one with love" (Eagleton, 2004:121).

The impact of globalization in Turkey coincides after 1980 which was the period of enforcement of neoliberal policies. The stage reached today is consistent with findings in the analysis mentioned above in brief. Today multicultural theatre vision in Turkey is undertaken by libertarian artists. A lot of private companies mainly in Istanbul describing themselves as "alternative theatre" are staging plays which focuses on ethnic and religious identities through culture, gender discrimination, sexual preference, imposing sexual orientation,

children rights, and the concept of otherness. While replacing the custom of Western modern plays with the post-modern ones, the subsidized theatres are also in tendency toalternative private theatre's multicultural theatre samples.

All these developments that give priority to human rights and reflects diversity in tune with the times seems positive. However, some samples are quite problematic which especially instrumentalize multiculturalism by ideological means and present cultures by decomposing them. This at the same time corresponds to the demand for decomposition from the common symbolic repertoire. Another important problem is that the post-modern myths which produced by global cultural instruments on the basis of consumption ideology pose a threat to the common, authentic symbolic space of the people. Hence, the instrumentalization of theatre, in this direction, paves the way for the deconstruction of collective subconsciousness. Moreover, this stance surrenders art and theatre to the globally standardized culture, and exposed them to some sort of superficial popularization threat. Roberta Levitow, in her paper thatanalyses global crisis in theatre explains community'scollective happiness through the examples of principal origins of symbolic space;"At its most primitive –or primal-the theatre is a pagan ritual. It is a collective celebration of the dynamism, energy and sound of life…We are uplifted by the sheer fervour and vitality of collective sound and physicality." (Levitow, 2002:27)

II.   CONCLUSION

A community's common subconscious reflects to its symbolic space. Functionally this space is a space of all cultural instruments that unites the community around the idea of harmony. Through the human history the theatre seeks opportunities to provide social communication and to raise awareness is one of the most prominent arts of this space. In Turkey, in all periods, it has been sought to attract attention to the role of an original theatre tradition in improving different cultures' ability of coexistence. In spite of this, the modern forms that were active in 19th and 20th centuries, and the post-modern forms appeared as a result of the effects of globalization in 21st century make difficult for theatre to conduct its associative function. The social, cultural and moral functions of theatreincreasinglygain different meanings and this leads dissolution of the culture of coexistence. At this point, it is necessary to regain the function of traditional roots. As in the beginning of Republican era, creation of original models of research-interpretation-practice studiesin universities, and their guidance for private andsubsidizedtheatre companies may play an important role in the solution of contradictions.

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